



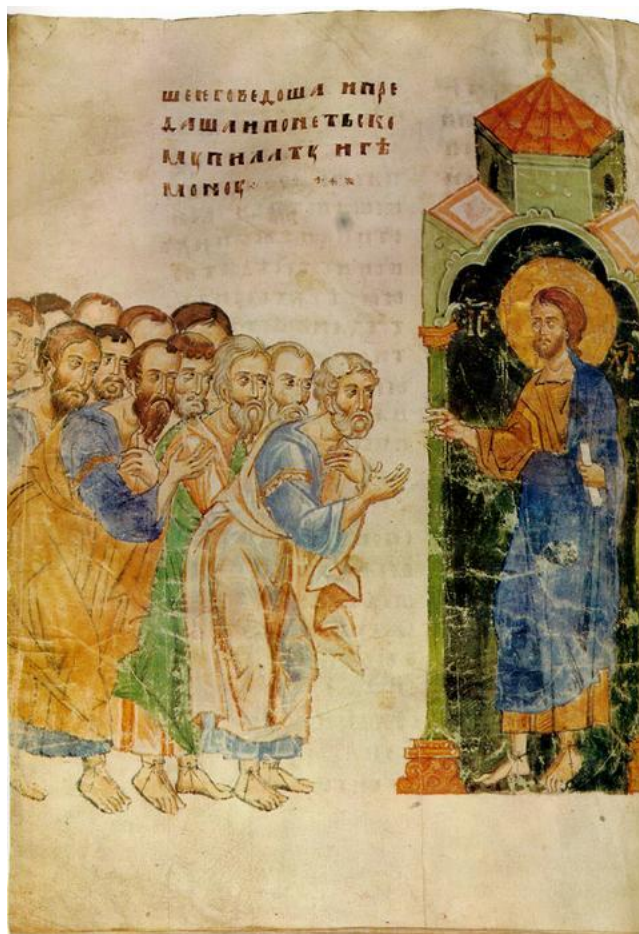
# Catholic Faith, Life & Creed

Doctrinal Catechesis Sessions for adults based on  
the Church Year, the Liturgy, & the Sunday Scriptures

## Breaking Open the Word

by Mary Birmingham

## 33<sup>rd</sup> Sunday in Ordinary Time | Year C



Jesus' True Relatives, @1340; Illustration from the Siysky Gospel



## Begin with the Sign of the Cross

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

### Opening Prayer

Option 1. Use Opening Prayer from the Sunday Liturgy.

Option 2.

God of My Life

Only in love can I find you, my God.

In love the gates of my soul spring open,  
allowing me to breathe a new air of freedom  
and forget my own petty self.

In love my whole being streams forth  
out of the rigid confines of narrowness and anxious self-assertion,  
which makes me a prisoner of my own poverty and emptiness.  
In love all the powers of my soul flow out toward you,  
wanting never more to return,  
but to lose themselves completely in you,  
since by your love you are the inmost center of my heart,  
closer to me than I am to myself.

But when I love you,  
when I manage to break out of the narrow circle of self  
and leave behind the restless agony

of unanswered questions,  
when my blinded eyes no longer look merely from afar  
and from the outside upon

your unapproachable brightness,  
and much more when you yourself,

O Incomprehensible One,  
have become through love the inmost center of my life,  
then I can bury myself entirely in you, O mysterious God,  
and with myself all my questions.

[Karl Rahner, SJ] <sup>1</sup>

Catholic  
**Faith, Life  
& Creed**  
Version 2.0

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Breaking Open the  
Word worksheets  
connect with *Catholic  
Faith, Life, & Creed*  
Doctrinal Sessions.

Editor: Bill Huebsch

Published cooperatively by  
TeamRCIA.com and  
PastoralPlanning.com.

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Shrine of St. Elizabeth Ann Seton at Church of our Lady of the Rosary.

## Liturgical Context

- ▶ The Gospels of these weeks are from the section of Luke's Gospel that takes place "on the way to Jerusalem." It is a journey every Christian must take.
- ▶ In these last days of the liturgical cycle the Church focuses on the end of life, end times and the afterlife.
- ▶ The Church groups all such themes under the umbrella of eschatology.
- ▶ Today we remember foundational truths of Christianity.

Catechist invites participants to respond to the following questions in groups of two, and then surface insights in the wider group.

- ▶ What spoke to your heart in today's liturgy?
- ▶ What reading, symbol, music, homily, spoke to you and why did it speak to you?
- ▶ What touched you the most in today's Gospel?

If time is a consideration, omit reflection on one of the readings.

## First Reading: Malachi 3:19-20a

- ▶ The Book of Malachi was written after the exile, about four centuries before the birth of Christ.
- ▶ Scholars suggest that the name comes from a word (*mal- akki*) that means "my messenger".
- ▶ The people were depressed and downcast after the exile even though they were permitted to return to their homes.
- ▶ They were given permission and the resources to rebuild the Temple.
- ▶ That did not, however, provide communal, liturgical or spiritual unity.
- ▶ The clergy failed in their responsibility to the people. Their worship was disorganized and few took their responsibility to the poor seriously. The chasm between rich and poor became wider.
- ▶ Malachi's perspective was that the unjust prospered while faithful believers were barely able to survive.
- ▶ Malachi promised a reversal of fortunes.
- ▶ Three centuries earlier the prophet Amos promised a day of judgment for the sins of the people. The people had hoped for just the opposite. The people believed the *Day of the Lord* would be a day of vindication and rejoicing. Amos shattered their dreams.
- ▶ After the exile talk of the *Day of the Lord* resurfaced. It was to be a day of judgment against the unjust. The faithful would be saved, but the unrighteous would be destroyed by the fire of the sun.
- ▶ Those same rays would be a source of healing for the righteous.
- ▶ The people of Egypt and Persia had great reverence for the sun. It was illustrated as a solar disk. The sun god was considered a source of life, light and warmth.
- ▶ Scripture applied the metaphor and image of the sun god to God almighty—the source of light and life for all. God would destroy evil in his fire's his fire's entire consuming blaze.
- ▶ The term was later applied to Jesus—the Sun of Justice who would come as God's

- ▶ Son to be light for the world and who would come again to judge all people.
- ▶ This reading aptly fits within the themes of these last days of the liturgical cycle. We focus our attention on eschatological themes—end times, last things, judgment and vindication.
- ▶ Malachi appropriately sets the stage for our end of the year reflections.



## Mystagogy

### reflection on the mysteries

Catechist invites participants to respond to one or more of the following questions in groups of two, and then surface brief insights in the wider group. Catechist responds with a “brief” story from his or her life. See appendix #1 for an example.

- ▶ What is the Good News in this reading?
- ▶ How is this a relevant word for believers today?
- ▶ How would you be judged in Malachi’s eyes?
- ▶ In what way does he convict you to be a better disciple?
- ▶ What does this reading teach us about our relationship with God?

## Second Reading: 2 Thessalonians 3: 7-12

- ▶ Today’s pericope continues to respond to a situation in the Thessalonians community.
- ▶ Some members of the community were caught up in the gnostic belief that the *Day of the Lord* had already arrived and those who experienced the special gnosis (knowledge) were already living in it. That very self-proclaimed elite group refused to work or participate in the life of the community.
- ▶ Since these Gnostic adherents refused to work, there was a greater burden placed on others in the community to do the work they refused to do.
- ▶ The text that condemns those who refuse to work has often been lifted out of whole cloth as a proof text to condemn the poor who do not work hard enough to take care of themselves.
- ▶ Biblical scholars remind us to avoid a literalist, fundamentalist rendering of the text that affirms that unless a person works, that person does not eat. They tell us that the cultural situation in antiquity was not the same as the cultural situation today. This text must be read in consort with conditions on the ground today.
- ▶ We need to interpret the text today in a way that conveys the same idea but addresses the actual situation of contemporary society.
- ▶ When world-wide societies today deal with massive unemployment for huge numbers of their poor populations, to condemn them further by saying Scripture says they should not eat unless they work, it only adds more burdens upon an already afflicted and oppressed population.
- ▶ This is more than anything else a warning to those in any class—rich or poor—who shirk their responsibilities. It is not to be used as a fundamentalist proof text

against providing welfare payments to the “undeserving” poor.

- ▶ The gnostic believers put a burden on the entire community by their refusal to work. The way the community addressed this imbalance was to insist that only those who contributed would be allowed to reap the benefits of the toil of others.
- ▶ Above all else, however, they and we must uphold the law of love in all things.
- ▶ Paul told the community to look to him as an example. He worked to the point of utter fatigue to promote the reign of God.
- ▶ Paul told them to be steadfast in their work, diligent in their waiting and to live their daily lives with joy and anticipation of the future heavenly kingdom as they worked to establish the kingdom in their midst.



## Mystagogy

### reflection on the mysteries

Catechist invites participants to respond to one or more of the following questions in groups of two and then surface brief insights in the wider group. Catechist responds with a “brief” story or reflection from his or her life. See appendix #2 for an example.

- ▶ In what way, if any, is this letter a relevant letter today?
- ▶ What is your attitude toward the poor in our midst? Have you ever been tempted to say that only those who work are allowed to eat? (How does that attitude address the plight of the homeless, the mentally ill, the sick and infirm, the unemployed who cannot find work, the unskilled laborer for whom there is no work?)
- ▶ In what way does this text challenge you to be a better disciple? What attitude or posture or behavior in you is challenged by this reading?
- ▶ What does our faith tell us our response should be?

## Gospel: Luke 21: 5-19

- ▶ Today’s Gospel brings the teaching Christ front and center. Jesus was teaching in the Temple precincts.
- ▶ Jesus responds to a question posed to him about Temple adornment. Jesus uses the question as a teachable moment about the *Day of the Lord*—the End of Time.
- ▶ All will know the end is upon them. Evidence will include a time of overt witness to the mighty deeds of God, the emergence of false prophets and messiahs, political upheaval and wars, weather disturbances, armies surrounding Jerusalem and finally the return of the Son of Man as promised.
- ▶ As to the day and the hour, Luke’s Gospel promises that the Temple will be destroyed prior to the End.
- ▶ Luke’s primary message is one of perseverance in the face of persecution and a call to steadfast faithfulness as believers prepare for Christ’s return.
- ▶ True disciples will rid themselves of falsehood, dishonesty and hypocrisy.
- ▶ The faithful believer’s actions must correspond with his or her transformed heart.



- ▶ Disciples are to hold fast to their faith even in the face of death.
  - ▶ Disciples are to trust in God's sovereignty over their lives on earth and beyond the grave.
  - ▶ God will deal with the unjust. They will be damned to Gehenna<sup>2</sup>—a place of torment.
  - ▶ People will be judged according to their faith in Christ.
  - ▶ Disciples will not be forgiven if they deny the Holy Spirit.
  - ▶ As far as Luke is concerned to deny the Holy Spirit is to deny the risen Christ and the Spirit he sent to the Church for the forgiveness of sins.
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- ▶ Today's Gospel serves as a warning and an exhortation to disciples to remain steadfast when they are dragged in front of kings, Jewish courts and magistrates in defense of the Gospel.
  - ▶ They will be martyred for the faith but if they remain steadfast they will enjoy everlasting reward with Christ.
  - ▶ Endurance and perseverance as they awaited Christ's return were major themes in the emerging Christian church.
  - ▶ Today's Gospel reflects the crisis situation of the early Lucan community. It is looking back on the mission of Christ in light of the destruction of Jerusalem and the Temple.
  - ▶ Luke's community believed that the signs all pointed toward the End; it was upon them. The Temple was obliterated. Check. The political situation was grave. Check. Weather patterns and cosmic phenomenon were abundant. Check. All that was left was the return of God's Son, Jesus the Christ.
  - ▶ Today's Gospel is apocalyptic in tone. It looks toward the imminent return of Christ and the end of the world as they knew it.
  - ▶ Apocalyptic literature did not look to future events. Apocalyptic literature wrote as if the apocalypse was already happening.
  - ▶ Another common feature of such Biblical literature is that it gets exaggerated and adapted to present conditions in the ongoing transmission.
  - ▶ All three synoptic Gospels refer to the destruction of the Temple as a sign that the end was near.
  - ▶ Apocalyptic literature was used to express God's ultimate power over life as well as forgiveness, deliverance and salvation.
  - ▶ Apocalyptic literature emerges throughout salvation history and is especially appealing in times of crisis. It is a reminder of our hunger for peace, a better world and union with God.
  - ▶ The situation in the reading from Thessalonians is a prime example of how apocalyptic fervor can be taken to the extreme and can harm a community.
  - ▶ Every generation is aware of various groups of people who search for the perfect

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<sup>2</sup>Gehenna was a place near Jerusalem where the children were sacrificed to the god, Molech. Josiah's reforms turned the place into a garbage-dump. Symbolically it was understood as a place of punishment for God's enemies.

world, give up on this one and often lead their community to destruction and death. The mass suicides of cults such as Heaven's Gate and Jim Jones are such examples.

- ▶ Apocalyptic literature has enjoyed various functions throughout the history of such literature. It is used as a critique against power structures both in civil society and in the Church. It is been used as a word of hope in troubled times, affirming that one's lot in life can improve.
- ▶ Apocalyptic literature has also been used as a word of encouragement and consolation in the tension between right and wrong, thus challenging believers to make appropriate moral choices. Such literature reminds people that perseverance in the face of suffering will be rewarded.
- ▶ The apocalyptic material in the Gospels points to the persecution of the first apostles such as Peter, Paul and James and ultimately the persecution and martyrdom of Jesus. We know that Jesus spoke of the destruction of the Temple since it was one of the charges leveled against him. Thus, his teaching when joined to the experience of the early persecuted Church provided the grist for early Christian apocalyptic literature. Today's Gospel is an example of that literature.
- ▶ Included in Christian apocalyptic material is the exhortation to pray, to remain vigilant, to persevere and to engage in ongoing conversion of heart.
- ▶ Nothing is to distract believers from their relationship and faith in the living Christ.
- ▶ Believers are not to worry when they face persecution for the sake of the Gospel. The Holy Spirit will sustain and uphold them in time of trial.



## Mystagogy

### reflection on the mysteries

Catechist invites participants to respond to one or more of the following questions in small groups of four. Use the last three or four minutes to surface the insights in the wider group. Catechist begins by sharing story from his or her life. See appendix #3 for an example. (@ Ten-twelve minutes)

- ▶ In what way is this a relevant word for us today?
- ▶ What is the primary message of this Gospel?
- ▶ Imagine you have been charged with being a Christian. Would there be enough evidence to convict you? What evidence is there?
- ▶ Imagine that you have it on good authority that the world is ending soon. You do not know the day or the hour, but all signs are certainly pointing to the end. What would be your response?
- ▶ If the Two Great Commandments are what drive our relationship with God, how would you respond in love to the immanent day of the Lord's return? What would God want you to do, to consider?
- ▶ In what way if any does your church community prepare for Christ's ultimate return? Does it live as though it truly believes that the Lord is coming soon? What is the primary agenda of your parish community?

- ▶ What does this story teach us about God's relationship with us?

Catechist invites participants to silently reflect on the following question.

- ▶ After reflection on today's liturgy, what one thing is God asking of you at this time in your life?
- ▶ What obstacles stand in the way of following God's call?

### **CONCLUDING PRAYER**

Repeat OPENING PRAYER for this session OR

Minor rite: Blessing: 95-97



## APPENDIX

#1. It does seem at times that the wicked prosper while the just suffer. It is a primary mystery of discipleship. Within that mystery lays Christian hope--the hope we all share that no matter what we are called to endure, we do not endure it alone. God walks with us in it and through it and we in turn walk with others.

Thirty years ago a friend of mine experienced the tragic loss of her three year old daughter. There is not a day she does not grieve her loss. The wisdom and strength she experienced from that loss is a lesson to us all.

She told me that the only thing that keeps her going is the gift of empathy she was given as a result of her loss. While she wished she had her precious daughter with her, she knows that her grief put her in communion with others who have similarly experienced a heart-wrenching loss. Unless and until one has experienced such a tragedy, one has no way of truly understanding the sorrow of another. The wisdom and knowledge of human sorrow and God's consolation are what has sustained her through the years.

As a result of her unfathomable sorrow she has reached out to others who have similarly suffered. Thus, even though tragedy befell this faith-filled, righteous woman, her hope of reuniting with her daughter in heaven and the joy and consolation of offering solace to others is what sustains her as she waits for her *Day of the Lord*.

Would that I could approach the sorrows of life in such an other-centered manner. God truly blessed my friend with presence, consolation and wisdom of the ages.

#2. The letter to the Thessalonians is about a group of elite people who thought that they alone had special access to God and that God was transporting them into perfect union with him to the exclusion of others in the community and that the *Day of the Lord* had already arrived for them. As such they believed they need not worry about such mundane things as growing and preparing food. Others in the community not so gifted could worry about such things.

Every community has members who think their access to God is more authentic over other people's access to God. It is an age-old problem that is part of the human condition. We call it pride, arrogance and sin.

However, since the exhortation in this reading that only those who work will be allowed to eat has been used so often as a proof text against helping the poor in our modern communities, it is appropriate to address that literalist attitude. The letter to the Thessalonians is not a commentary on the mindset and plight of the poor.

So many people have the idea that the poor are somehow responsible for their own plight—that if they put their mind to it they could simply pick themselves up by the bootstraps and change their lot in life. It is not so simple; so many things militate against the poor improving their situations.

One example comes from my own experience. My husband and I lived in a suburb of a large Midwestern city. We wanted to move closer to the city to work with poverty stricken people in a particular area. We looked for a place to rent near the parish that helped minister to the city's poor people. Every place we looked at was not fit for human habitation; they were rat-infested, filthy places. What was worse, we could not afford to move. The rent we were paying in the suburbs was less per month than what was being charged for the horrible places we observed. The reason for the discrepancy was the people could pay by the week in the filthy places near the city. Since that is how their meager salaries were paid (weekly), the system itself helped keep them poor.

It is so easy to judge poor people and think that they are simply responsible for their own condition. It is another to get inside the sinister reasons that many of them are prevented from improving their condition. Those who oppress the poor and blame them for their own condition oppress Christ who offered them comfort, hope and upheld their human dignity.

#3. If I knew that the end of the world was coming soon, I would want to first examine my heart and my motives. I would ask forgiveness (something I should do everyday anyway) for the arrogance, pride and lack of humility in my heart. I would hopefully make amends with all I have hurt in my life. I would want to share the Good News with as many as I could reach. I would more fervently reach out to the poor and disenfranchised and I would nurture my most intimate relationships.

As I write this, I cannot help but ask myself, "If that is what I would do if I heard the end was near, shouldn't those things be my priority right now?" Are not those things the priority of every disciple"? Indeed they are.

I could and should say that I want to do all those things more earnestly. I most especially would want to examine my heart and my motives. I know I can be my own worst enemy and fool myself more than I fool anyone else. Thus it behooves me to practice the art of examining my conscience.

Each of us will have our own end of the world; thus further behooving us to live each day as though it were upon us. We are blessed with a liturgical year that provides us with those reminders.



# Connecting Liturgy with Catholic Doctrine

Possible doctrinal themes that flow from this week's  
Liturgy of the Word and Eucharist

Heaven, Hell and Purgatory  
Salvation  
Creed  
Morality  
Moral Decision Making

Life issues  
Jesus Christ  
Sacrament of Reconciliation  
Eucharist Series

Other themes may be chosen as well--choose from the scope and sequence chart and create your own connecting statement. The following statements make the appropriate connections between the doctrinal issue you have chosen and the liturgy of the day.

## ESCHATOLOGY, END TIMES, HEAVEN, HELL AND PURGATORY

Today's second reading and Gospel look to that future Day of the Lord and remind us to be vigilant, persevere in faith and diligent as we await the Lord's return. It is thus most appropriate as the Church year begins its slow winding down that we focus our attention on what the Church teaches about ESCHATOLOGY, END TIMES, HEAVEN, and HELL AND PURGATORY.

## SALVATION

Today's liturgy is a testament to the salvation God has given to his children. He gifts us with eternal life through the power of Christ's death and resurrection and today's liturgy reminds us that each day we are to be prepared for the culmination of that salvation in our lives. The readings today invite preparedness and watchfulness for the Lord's coming and the salvation he brings. We are thus invited into intimate relationship with the God who continues his ongoing work of salvation in the world. It is thus fitting that we focus our attention on what the Church teaches about SALVATION.

## CREED

Today's liturgy affirms our belief in the Christ event. Christ's salvific resurrection from the dead, and our own overall belief in the afterlife. Such beliefs are foundational Christian truths and as such are proclaimed in the Creed we profess every Sunday in the Eucharistic Liturgy. It is thus fitting that we focus our attention on what the Church teaches about the CREED.

## **MORALITY**

As we focus our attention on Last Things and the End of Time in these last days of the liturgical year it would be important to focus our attention on right living—how we make moral choices. It is thus appropriate that we focus our attention on what the Church teaches about CHRISTIAN MORALITY.

## **MORAL DECISION MAKING**

As we focus our attention on Last Things and the End of Time in these last days of the liturgical year it would be important to focus our attention on right living—how we make moral choices. It is thus appropriate that we focus our attention on what the Church teaches about MORAL DECISION MAKING.

## **LIFE ISSUES**

As we focus our attention on *Last Things* and eternal life, it is important that we focus on living life to the fullest—life from womb to tomb. Thus, as we focus our attention on eternal values it is important to reflect on what it means to live this life in accord with God's will for our lives. Let us thus reflect on what the Church teaches about a life ethic from womb to tomb, let us reflect on LIFE ISSUES.

## **JESUS CHRIST**

Jesus is the long awaited messiah—the messiah of the new kingdom he came to establish—not a political kingdom rooted in power, possessions and prestige, but one rooted in life with God. It is thus appropriate that we focus our attention on that Messiah who promises eternal life and died for us to ensure it. It is thus fitting that we focus our attention on JESUS CHRIST.

## **SACRAMENT OF RECONCILIATION**

One way we are constantly vigilant and ready for Christ's return is to be conscious of our need for God's grace and mercy. One fountain of that grace and mercy is experienced in the sacrament of reconciliation. It is thus appropriate to focus our attention today on the SACRAMENT OF RECONCILIATION.

## **EUCCHARIST SERIES:**

Our premier celebration of the Paschal Mystery—the life, passion, death, resurrection, ascension sending of the Spirit is made manifest and re-presented for us in the Eucharistic liturgy. Today we will focus on part \_\_\_\_ of the Eucharistic Series.